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When I Was

A Child

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"THE LITTLE HAND CLASPED TIGHT IN HAND,
SWEET GIRL, GLAD BOY, TOGETHER."

# WHEN I WAS A CHILD

BY

ERNEST W. SHURTLEFF

AUTHOR OF

"EASTER GLEAMS," AND OTHER POEMS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

F. CHILDE HASSAM

BOSTON

D LOTHROP COMPANY

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Dedicated

TO

MY FATHER

## WHEN I WAS A CHILD.

I.

WHEN I was a child, sweet years ago,
My heart was light and merry,
My cheeks were red as the ruddy glow
Of summer's ripening cherry.
I skipped the sunny schoolward way,
My thoughts to gladness given,
My life o'erflowing, like the day,
With beauty born in heaven.

The very ground enchanted seemed,
Each dewy blossom's chalice
That blushed its right to bloom, I dreamed
Some dainty fairy's palace.

And when I walked the fields alone,
By fragrant meadows plodding,
I thought the daisies, softly blown,
To me "good day" were nodding.
A spell seemed binding all the world
As though by magic olden,
And every path seemed gemmed and pearled,
And every fancy golden.
My hopes, like lilies when they blow,
In perfect trust took blossom,
And if God plucked them, it was so
To wear them on His bosom.

Half-hidden by a vernal hood
Of vines as fresh as smilax,
Alone, and weather-beaten, stood
The schoolhouse in the lilacs.
The walls with hoary moss were gray,
Unknown to fame or fiction,
But on the roof the sunshine lay —
God's golden benediction.

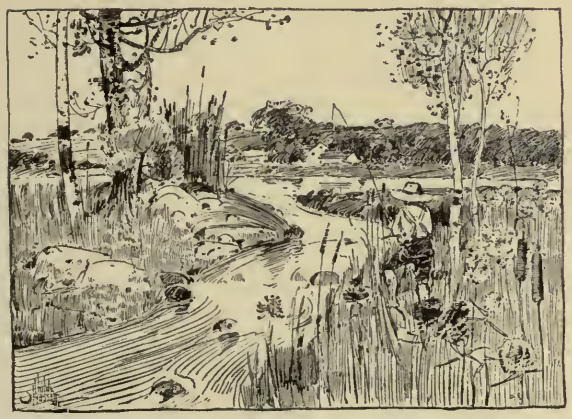
As Memory comes with shining face,
The past again restoring,
We view in thought the happy place,
Each dusty nook exploring.
The walls with names and secrets sweet
Scrawled o'er the crumbling plaster,
The threshold, worn by noisy feet,
The high seat for the master,
Who, frowning o'er his glasses, raised
His hand with mien indignant,
Or stroked his beardless chin, and gazed
With gracious smile benignant;
Or paced the room with searching eye,
Our every look to follow,
His hands behind him, hidden by
The coat-tails of his swallow.
The plain board desks, all scratched and worn,
The spread of low white ceiling,
The cooling breeze that came at morn,
Through open windows stealing,

The sun-tanned children in a row,
The simple lesson telling; —
In those fair days, sweet years ago,
That room was Wisdom's dwelling.
The bustling wren sang round the eaves
And, in the hush of classes,
We heard outside the rustling leaves
And whispering of the grasses;
And when the hour of work was done,
Aside our lessons laying,
With skip and shout and merry run
We took us to our playing.

II.

As gay as any butterfly
That haunts the meadow grasses,
We played the shining moments by,
We little lads and lasses.
We plucked the early buds of spring,
Where birds in song were breathing;

We chose a May-time queen and king,
Their crowns of violets wreathing;
We caught the trout in bubbling brooks
O'er pearly pebbles flowing;



We wandered into pasture nooks
Where dreamy cows were lowing;
We climbed the towering pine, to find
The crows' nest high secreted;

We heard the roaring of the wind
That through the branches fleeted;
We gathered strawberries, wild and sweet,
That nestled hid in clover;
We walked the log with daring feet,
That bridged the river over;
We gave the timid rabbit chase,
We filled the woods with singing,
We lead in dreams the steeple race,
On bending birches swinging.
When I was a child, sweet years ago,
And through the woods went Maying,
The whole day seemed to overflow
With plans for joyous playing.

III.

Then came the glowing July days,
When summer's sun was burning;
The farmers, in the meadow ways,
The new-cut grasses turning;

"WE GAVE THE TIMID RABBIT CHASE,
WE FILLED THE WOODS WITH SINGING."

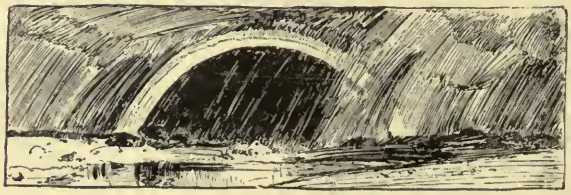
The gleaming scythe — how bright it swept
  Like silver through pink clover!
And how the dewdrops flashed and wept
  The daisied meadows over!
How stirred the air with breathing balm,
  And flute like notes of thrushes!
The purling brook — how blue and calm,
  Among the reeds and rushes!
The bobolink song-charmed the hills,
  The blackbirds voiced the meadows;
The air was filled with treble trills,
  And dancing lights and shadows;
And now and then a yellow bird
  Gleamed fluttering through the heather,
And where he perched the leaflets stirred,
  And fell a golden feather:
And, near the tide of mellowing noon,
  We heard an elfin humming,
As though the honeyed bees of June
  In busy swarms were coming.

But no — for 'round the roses fair,
We saw a something airy
That seemed half creature of the air,
And half a flower-fairy.
His iris wing, his slender bill,
His purple-tinted bosom —
O humming-bird, how well you fill
The semblance of a blossom!
We used to chase you, dainty fay,
From flower to sister flower,
And when at last you stole away
New birdlings sought your bower.
We saw the flaming oriole
Gleam through the orchard closes —
That star-bird, gifted with a soul
That in its song reposes.
Ah, Oriole, thy flight had cleft
In some far sky's dominions,
A sunset cloud, and lo! it left
Its glory on thy pinions!

Else why that hue so rich, so bright,
Of red and orange blending,
Just such as evening gives to night
When glowing day is ending?

But see! the cart is filled with hay,
We climb the fragrant mountain,
And ride the joggling homeward way,
Each heart a laughter-fountain.

And scarcely has the precious store
The old barn roof passed under,
When, in the west, we hear the roar
Of distance-muffled thunder;



And quickly comes the rushing shower
In shaking peals and flashes,
The shrouded fury of an hour,
Swift winds, and silver plashes!
A rainbow in the midst appears,
The darkness glorifying,
A benediction in the tears
Of Hope and Sorrow vying.

Then, in the west, the sun sinks low,
  Pink clouds through ether roaming —
When I was a child sweet years ago,
  What charms were in the gloaming!

IV.

When Autumn's frosty fingers turned
  The silver grain to yellow,
And all the orchard branches burned
  With rosy fruitage mellow,
We went a nutting where the breeze
  Shook down the wealth in showers,
The boys like tempests in the trees,
  The girls beneath, like flowers.

We climbed the mows of fragrant hay
  In barns where swallows twittered,
And beams of sunshine, blithe as they,
  On golden pinions flittered.

We built us cosey nests, and there
We hid with stifled laughter,
While little seekers, sweet and fair,
Climbed dusty beam and rafter,
And, guided by the smothered sound,
Found out our hiding places;
Then for the goal with eager bound,
Quick breath and ruddy faces!
And so we played and laughed and hid
Until the dew was falling,
And, through the dusk, the katydid
Her own glad name was calling.

Then came the quiet homeward walk,
Through paths that crossed the meadows;
The childish hopes and happy talk,
The years leave in the shadows;
The little hand clasped tight in hand,
Sweet girl, glad boy together;
The twilight dreaming o'er the land,
Soft touching hill and heather.

Methinks again I see the face
Of her who walked beside me,
The soft light crowns the brow of grace,
A star of peace to guide me.
I see again the soft blue eyes,
The silken ringlets blowing;
I hear the soothing voice arise
Like rills in summer flowing;
The little head thrown back, the form
So light, the laugh so ringing;
The small brown hand in mine, as warm
As a rose in sunshine springing.
Oh! give me back my playmate's love,
Her saintly face so shining —
Dear God! she dwells with Thee above
While I am here repining.
'Tis better so, 'tis better so,
No sins to be forgiven —
When she was a child, sweet years ago,
She found the way to Heaven.

V.

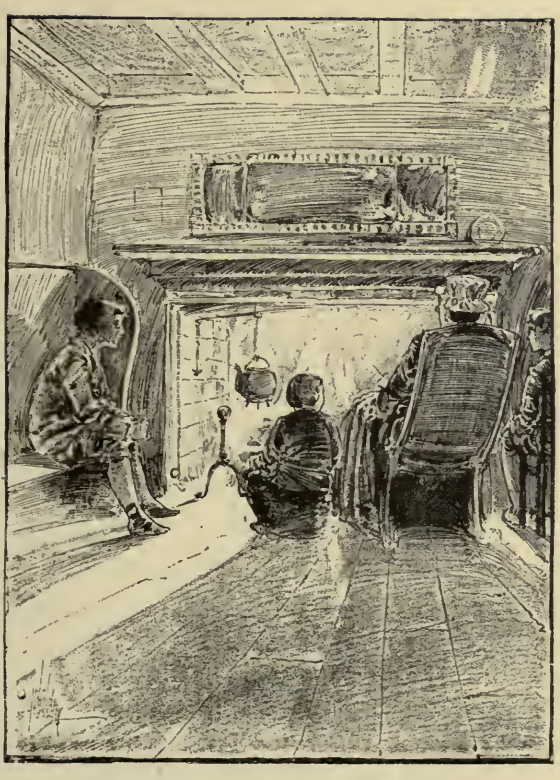
And now I dream of winter time,
Of many a snow-ball battle;
Of windows white with silver rime
And picture hills and cattle.
The silent, modest, careless snow —
All day from heaven it showered,
Till naked trees grew white, as though
Their boughs again had flowered.
Then did the happy boys and girls
Coast through the valley closes,
The sharp wind tossing golden curls,
And touching cheeks with roses.

We skated on the crystal pond,
And set the bonfire gleaming,
When, in the west, far hills beyond,
We saw the first star dreaming.

And I remember Christmas time,
The lonely night wind sighing,
The silver sleigh-bells' passing chime
In frosty distance dying.

And grandmother — her blesséd face,
All beautiful and wrinkled —
So pure had grown her soul in grace
Her brow with white was sprinkled.
Her eyes, how loving, meek and mild,
How fond her hand's caressing!
To me, a hopeful, careless child,
Her presence was a blessing.
Again I feel the firelight's spell,
And hear the low voice telling
The tale we children loved so well
To hear in that dear dwelling.

The Christmas tree close by is seen,
And groups of sunny faces,
The holly wreaths and evergreen
Hung in the window places,
The popping corn, like furious snow,
Storms ever white and whiter,
And, sparkling in the ruddy glow,
Our wondering eyes grow brighter.



"AGAIN I FEEL THE FIRELIGHT'S SPELL."

Now come the games of "blind-man's-buff,"
About the great round table,
With roaring fun, and noise enough
To drown the cries of Babel.
But grandmother, with finger tips
So beautiful and slender,
Pressed softly on her smiling lips,
Compels a hushed surrender.
She leads the tired, lingering feet
Upstairs to Slumber City,
She hears the hurried prayers so sweet,
And kisses lips so pretty,
And leaves the weary, white-gowned flock
To dreams and downy sleeping;
Meanwhile the stately old house-clock,
A faithful vigil keeping,
Ticks louder in the growing calm,
Till eyelids, heavy seeming,
Are softly closed by slumber's charm,
And leave us soundly dreaming.

Dear grandmother! Her life's bright beams
Have found at last their number,
And only now in blessed dreams
She bends above our slumber.
An angel came to lead her feet
Upstairs to Slumber City,
And left our lonely hearts to beat
Without her love and pity.

VI.

Ah me! still, still the memories come,
When I am weary hearted;
For in my heart they found a home
When life and childhood parted.
When I was a child in those sweet years,
I played in sight of Heaven,
But now the way remote appears
With sins to be forgiven!
Oh, give me back those dear old days,
And let them leave me never!

Nay, nay, His hand on those sweet ways
  Hath laid the Past forever.
The spirit of that blesséd Past
  Lies like an angel sleeping;
She folds upon her bosom fast
  The joys for which I'm weeping!
She cannot wake, she cannot lift
  Her hand again to love me,
But lies as hushed as the clouds that drift
  Through silent skies above me;

Yet in my heart, in music mild,
  A tender voice seems saying,—
If thou would'st be again a child
  With sweet-lipped children playing—
Be pure in soul, and thou shalt know
  A surcease of thy sorrow,
And the peace of the happy long ago
  Shall dawn with God's to-morrow.

Again, thy heart shall light become,
Thy youth shall leave thee never,
And a glad child in thy Father's home
Shalt thou remain forever.

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